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Children home alone

Is your child ready to be left home alone?

Thousands of children in Wisconsin arrive home after school to an empty house.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that nationwide nearly 7 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 are left home alone for some period of time each school day.

As parents, the question remains: When is it safe to leave my child home alone?

Generally speaking, a child age 12 or older can baby-sit if they are responsible and have completed a certified baby-sitting course. This is an excellent guideline for parents to follow when determining if their child is ready to be left home alone or responsible for younger siblings.

Most children under 12 are not mature enough to safely handle this responsibility, and some children over 12 may not be able to do so.

What parents can do

Parents need to determine if their child is ready to be on his or her own. Your child may be ready to be home alone when he or she:

- Is unafraid to be alone in the house
- Follows house rules consistently
- Can be relied upon to tell the truth
- Exhibits common sense
- Can deal with unexpected situations in a positive way
- Can safely keep busy without constant supervision

If your child is ready to stay home alone, you can ensure your child's safety by preparing for emergencies. Make sure locks and smoke alarms work properly.

Be sure your child knows how to use a fire extinguisher and first-aid kit, and post emergency numbers by the phone. Lock up firearms, ammunition, alcohol, prescription drugs or other items that may be a temptation to an unsupervised pre-teen or teen.

Most important, spend some time talking to your child about safety, security and home rules.

Establish rules for checking in with you or another adult immediately upon arriving home.

Determine whether friends can visit or if your child can play outside when home alone.

Encourage your child to keep the doors locked and not to reveal to callers that he or she is home alone.

If your child is not ready to be left home alone, there are a variety of supervised programs available to help bridge the gap between school dismissal and a parent's arrival at home, including:

- Homework clubs and before- and after-school care at many area schools
- Centers that provide daycare for younger children that also may have before- and afterschool programs for older children
- Community centers and youth organizations that provide structured, supervised recreation programs for school-age children, pre-teens and teens